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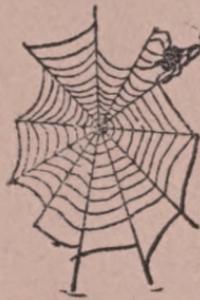
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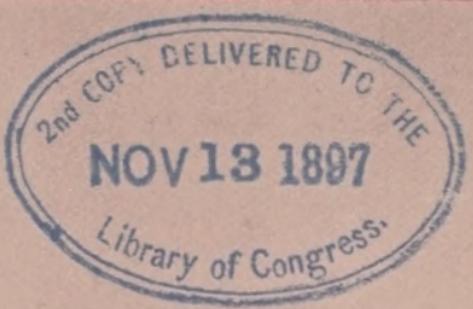
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Love and Passion

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Love and Passion.



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BY
M. HOLLAND.



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Love and Passion.

It was with an impatient step, but with a glad light in his eyes that Richard Preston sought his young wife—Mabel—after an absence of three days; the first separation they had known in their three months of wedded life. It had promised to be a longer one, but Richard had worked day and night to accomplish the business that had called him away, in order to be able to return home sooner than he had expected. Home! How much that word implied now to one who had not known the comforts of a home for twenty years. And such a home! Every luxury that money could buy to render it a beautiful home, had been placed in or around it, but it would have been as nothing in the

eyes of Richard Preston had it not been for the presence of the little woman who had come there as its mistress and his wife.

His wife! How he loved to linger over the thought, and what a world of happiness it carried with it, and yet he had even hesitated to make her his wife, feeling that he, a man of thirty-five, had no right to ask a young and beautiful girl of scarce twenty years, to share his home. For four years he had loved her as only a man of his years is capable of loving, but it had been without a word or a look to betray that love. He had contented himself with being her father's friend and in that capacity her constant companion. But the time came when her father died and she was left alone in the world, and then the strong man broke down. He could bear to see her happy, but he could not see her suffer and make no sign, and simply, but with a world of tenderness in his voice he told of his great love and asked her to be his wife. She begged for time to think of what had come to her as a sudden surprise. A week, a month had passed and then she came to him

and as simply as he had asked her, so did she reply by putting her hands in his and looking in his face as she said:—

“Richard, I will be your wife.”

There had been times since then when he wondered if it would not have been better for her if he had kept quiet and stood back until someone nearer her own age had won her heart. He was very sure that out of all the admirers she had had, there was but one who had touched her heart to any extent and he had suddenly gone away and was now generally supposed to have died about a year before her father's death. Knowing then that he had no rival, his desire was so to conduct himself toward his young wife, that he might always retain her love and that she might never regret having married a man so much older than herself.

After he had been married but a few weeks however, he dropped all doubts and gave himself up to an intensity of happiness he had scarcely dared dream of.

Now he was on his way, after a short absence, to the one little woman without whom he could not live. No,

if anything happened to take her from him—his heart almost stopped beating at the thought—it would kill him.

He entered the house softly now, wondering where he would find her. Would she be in the little room where she had always waited his coming? He hoped so and as he relieved himself of his coat and hat he pictured her in his mind as he had been wont to see her on entering the room. Ah! How often during the day did the vision rise before him of his wife seated musing before the open fire awaiting his return. And he thought of the bright smile that lighted up her face, as her eyes spoke a welcome. His child wife, he called her and surely she looked more a child than a woman with her heavy bangs falling almost to the large brown eyes of which he was so proud.

Noiselessly he entered the room where he hoped to find her, but she was not in her accustomed place and he was about leaving it when a sound as of a suppressed sob reached his ear, and turning his head he beheld his fair young wife crouching in one corner of a sofa with her face buried in the cushions.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" he cried passionately, falling down beside her and putting his arm around her.

"Oh, Richard," she said, looking up at him through tearless eyes, but with a face full of meek agony, and as he drew her closer, she added earnestly, "I am so glad you have come."

"Is it my absence that has caused this grief?" he asked, kissing her hair and forehead fondly.

"Richard," she replied, not answering his question directly, "I wish you would promise me never to go away again. Don't leave me ever again, please."

"My little wife, have you been so lonesome as that? I should have left some one here to have been better company for you than you have found yourself. Little one, have you missed me so much? And I have reproached myself at times for having appropriated the love of your young life. I have thought it might have been better to have kept quiet, and left you a younger man, but now—"

She trembled so violently that Richard stopped and

looking down into her face asked anxiously if she was ill.

"No, no," was the quick reply, but the pale terrified look on her face startled and puzzled him.

"Then you have had trouble of some kind, something has worried you. Tell me, my wife. Surely you don't hesitate to tell me freely of all that worries as well as pleases you?"

For answer his wife gave one convulsive sob and then fainted in his arms. Convinced that there was something serious the matter he at once summoned assistance and sent for a physician and for the kind hearted maiden lady who had acted as housekeeper in his wife's former home.

By the time the physician arrived his patient was in a condition that more seriously alarmed her husband than the fainting fit. She didn't seem to know him and yet she would not let him leave her, but would start up and look about her as if terrified and at times she would shake as with a chill. The doctor questioned Richard closely as to whether anything had happened





to give her a sudden shock and he in turn questioned those who had been about her while he was away, but apparently there had been nothing and Richard reproached himself for having left her for a day and bent over her with a face so full of anxiety and distress that Mrs. Marvin, the old housekeeper, could not restrain her tears. Indeed, as the hours went on, she feared she would have two patients instead of one and knowing he had eaten nothing since his return, she urged him, as the night wore on, to make an attempt to eat the supper that had been waiting for him for some hours. At first he refused even to leave the room, but before going to the dining room stepped into his study to see if any letters of importance awaited him.

On the table at which he always wrote lay an open letter which he eyed curiously, as he could not remember having left it there before he went away. The writing was not familiar and he sat down to examine it before putting it away. It was dated just two weeks back and in Liverpool, and ran thus:—

" MY LOVE, MY LIFE, MY OWN:—At last I can come and claim you before all the world and my heart is almost bursting with the love I have tried so hard to keep under control. What have you thought of my silence, that I have forgotten? No you could never think thst, but my darling, I was unfortunate at first and grew despondent thinking I could never offer you the home and luxuries I wished for you, but now I can ask you to be my wife before all the world, knowing that there are few who can offer you more in a worldly point of view than I. I can scarcely restrain my impatience as I am detained here on a matter of business, but in a very few days after you receive this, I shall be with you and my happiness will be complete when your lips tell me what your eyes so often have, that you love me—"

Richard laid down the letter here and mechanically took up the envelope which was addressed to his wife but by her maiden name. He had no need to look at the signature. He knew now whose hand had written the letter, and with a groan his head fell forward into his hand. How long he sat there he never knew. He could only remember that everything seemed a blank to him. Then he roused himself and rising paced the room slowly trying to take in the situation. This was

the shock that had caused his wife's illness. But could nothing ever be done to make matters straight? Must his wife—the thought caused him to groan once more. Why had not the letter come before he married her? But would he—could he give her up, even if it were possible now? No, no, a thousand times no. She was his all, his and no one could take her from him. No one? Might not the grim monster, death, be even now on his way to claim her? Yes, yes, he would give her up freely, willingly, if by so doing he could restore her to health and happiness, but could he? Ah! That was where the trouble came in. Only his death could ever release her from what was now a bondage and he was likely to live for many years,

In the morning the servants found the supper of the night before still untasted, for through the long hours of the night Richard had fought a battle that required as much courage and determination as the most renowned of those who have been made famous by history. But when, having changed his clothing and refreshed himself somewhat, he appeared before Mrs. Marvin to

nquire for his wife, that good woman found it impossible to suppress a sort of surprise. Never, she thought, had she seen such a change in any one in so short a time. He looked as though he had been ill for months and she hastened to tell him that his wife was better, thinking that it was her illness that had caused the change, but after he had been in to see her as she lay quietly sleeping, a deeper shade of sadness seemed to have settled on his face and she was puzzled. She noted too as the invalid rallied that in her presence he was always bright and cheerful, but when out of it the careworn expression would invariably return. For a week things went on in this way and then the invalid was able to leave her room, for her illness had not been so serious as had at first been feared, and she too began to notice a change, not that she felt any difference in his treatment toward her, but there was something she could not quite understand, and she had hardly seen on one or two occasions, when she had come upon him unexpectedly, the change in his looks.

“Richard,” she said one evening, laying her hand on



his arm and looking up into his face, "are you glad to have me about again?"

"Glad," he repeated, folding her in his arms. "Yes, little wife," and then without another word he released her and quietly left the room.

She stood for a moment where he had left her, a puzzled, pained expression coming into her face. Suddenly it changed to a questionable look. Could he know? Had he found out in any way? And with a sudden resolution she followed her husband into his library. He did not hear her enter nor did he see her, for he was back to the door.

"Richard," she said softly, kneeling before him and trying to draw his hands from his face, "this is not the first time you have left me suddenly lest my eyes should see the sadness that comes into your face at times. Richard, will you not tell me, your wife, what causes your sadness?"

"Little woman," he said tenderly, looking at her with a world of love in his eyes, "does my sadness trouble you so much?"

"Yes, Richard; and more particularly as I have a confession to make that may annoy you somewhat. I have waited until I was strong enough to bear to talk of it. May I now?"

"It is useless, little one, for I know all: I found his letter here on the writing table and not knowing it was not for my eyes, took it up and read enough to show me —O, my little wife, can you not see it is that has caused the sadness, the thought that I have bound you with fetters I am powerless to break?"

"You would then, Richard, if you could? You would give me freedom?"

"My darling. I love you too well not to wish for your happiness above everything. Believe me, if I had dreamed of his being alive, I should never have asked you to be my wife, for I always thought you had given your young love to him, and now, you will not mind my saying it but I think it would be easier for you, if you did not see him should he come here."

"Do you care only for me; nothing for yourself? It seems to me a woman ought to be proud of such an

unselfish husband. Some women would I am sure, but Richard, we can't quite help loving some people more than others, can we?"

"Do you say that because you think I may blame you for loving Walter more than you do me? No, no, little wife, I can never do that, but I want to make things in the future as easy for you as possible, and that is why I said I thought you had better not see Walter."

"Richard, I have seen him."

"Oh, my darling, my darling, it is worse than I thought it was."

"No, Richard, I am glad I have seen him. It will make things in the future easier. But let me tell you of it. His letter came the day you went away, and Richard, I can't begin to tell you how it affected me."

"Poor child," said her husband tenderly.

"You see," she continued, "I had cared for him before he went away and he knew it, but I so firmly believed him dead that the letter came like a shock and I did not know how I felt or what I thought. It was the day you came home that I come here to answer the let-

ter and tell him I was married, when he himself was announced. Oh, Richard, how I longed for you to spare me an interview that could but be painful, but I am glad now that you were not here."

"Poor child," again repeated her husband.

"It was a strange meeting," she continued, "and I felt as though I were greeting a man who had risen from the dead. I wish I need not tell you of the interview but I want to make you understand it all. When he asked me for an explanation of my inconsistency, as he called it, I told him that in the first place I had never been bound to him and when he went away without a word, I had believed for a long time that he would surely send me a line or a message, but that he did not, I the more readily believed the report of his death as I preferred that to the belief that he had tried to win my heart for his own amusement. I told him I had fought hard to bury my love and I believed I had succeeded when you asked me to be your wife. Had he been living, though I had never heard from him, I should even then have hesitated, but he was dead and you were one

of the best men who ever lived and I felt sure you would do everything you could to make me happy. Then Richard he began to reproach me, telling me he had left me purposely to prove my love and constancy, and assuring me that he even yet had more of a claim on me than you, for although you might claim me for a wife, he had my love and intended to keep it too. I will not repeat all that he said, for it was terrible, but Richard, listen, in reply I told him that though I might have hesitated at one time, I would not now for an instant were I free, for my husband has won my whole and undivided affection. Yes, Richard," she added, as with a sudden start he drew back and looked, as if fearful his senses were leaving him, "and I told too, before he left that I cared more for you than I ever dreamed I cou'd ever care for him or any one else."

"My own wife? Really mine, my own!" said Richard, folding her in his arms.

"Yes, Richard, all yours, but you must not blame me, if the first letter, and then the interview unnerved me so that I did not recover immediately."

"Blame you!" said Richard, but ere he could add more, she looked up mischievously and asked, "Would you really, really now set me free if you could, and leave me for a younger man, when I don't want a younger man? O, Richard, never say such a horrible thing again or I shall—scold."







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